

Book Review

Kai Rugenstein. 2014. *Humor: Die Verflüssigung des Subjekts bei Hippokrates, Jean Paul, Kierkegaard und Freud* [Humor: Fluidity and subjectivity in Hippocrates, Jean Paul, Kierkegaard and Freud]. Paderborn: Fink. 340 pp. ISBN: 978-3-7705-5703-5. EUR 42.90.

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Humor: die Verflüssigung des Subjekts bei Hippokrates, Jean Paul, Kierkegaard und Freud [Humor: Fluidity and subjectivity in Hippocrates, Jean Paul, Kierkegaard and Freud] by Kai Rugenstein is a journey through time in German. It follows the term ‘humor’ in its evolution from being understood as something purely physical (i. e., a bodily fluid) to the term as we use it today: as an umbrella term for everything funny (the Anglo-American application); or as a world view; or relating to a psychological state, ability or quality, an enduring disposition or trait (i. e., the sense of humor as described in Ruch 2004 and Ruch 2008). The journey stops off in the three periods in which Jean Paul, Søren Kierkegaard, and Sigmund Freud wrote about humor, and it connects these three accounts by arguing that humor relates to subjectivity within the individual. Rugenstein maintains that the term humor possesses three levels of meaning: the physical, the physiological, and the psychological; and his main hypothesis is that the individual (“the subject”) in all humor is located at the intersection of these three fields.

Like a mirror, humor offers a reflection and gives a double perspective. Thus it allows us to behave and react in certain ways towards objects, while, through reflection and perspective taking, we also learn something about ourselves. Furthermore, humor helps us to cope with the human condition, which is a *serious* matter. Therefore, humor and seriousness (the seriousness of life which ends in death) are necessarily linked. Last but not least, humor enables a range of actions and can thus be fruitfully used in the wider context of psychotherapy.

The book is tripartite, with the first part giving a genealogical perspective on the evolution of the term humor as we know it today, while part two gives an account of how humor relates to ethics, and the third section elaborates on the subject of humor in therapy. Each part begins with a problem statement and ends with a résumé of its main ideas.

Since humor must be interpreted in its historic context, the term itself will necessarily evolve, and Rugenstein vividly explains which circumstances and conditions led to the relevant changes. William Congreve’s 1695 essay, “Concerning

Humour in Comedy”, states that “humor is from nature”, seeing it as a physical entity. Only in the eighteenth century did this concept mutate into a non-physical phenomenon: humor as a behavioral act or psychological state, and one which, as Johann Gottfried Herder pointed out in 1769, was regarded as a “national term of the English”. This important change in the use of the term derived from the notion of humor as being a part of the active, reflective subject.

Rugenstein elaborates on the “first comprehensive humor theory” as established by Jean Paul (1763–1825), according to which humor (as distinct from the comic) is both subject and object, the former being of primary interest in this book. The humorist creates a reflective doubling of perspectives, a contrast between reality and ideal construction, infinity and finiteness. This contrast concerns not only the world but also the individual, and it links both humor and laughter to pain. However, through the identification with the self, enjoyment can be found, provided that the individual is able to change perspectives. As Rugenstein sees it, humor only gained its new meaning when perspective-taking by the active subject (*self-reflection*) became an important element in thinking and reflecting. An intriguing Renaissance example is Juan Huarte’s *Diferencias de ingenio ... en la especie humana* (1575, translated by Carew as “The examination of man’s wits” [reviewer’s italics]), which demonstrates a growing interest in divergences within the individual, as distinct from the established human temperaments constituted by the four *humores* (p.99). Interestingly, Rugenstein also explains the differences in the developing uses of the term in German and English.

The book’s second part concerns humor within an ethical framework, using in particular the work of Johannes Climacus (one of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms). In his writings on ethics and the good life, Kierkegaard also addressed humor, seeing neither it nor irony as aesthetic phenomena, but rather as the “deepest seriousness of life”: irony is a skeptical distance-taking, humor a benevolent one. Humor and seriousness are linked through life because humor is life and life is serious – *deadly serious* (p.146) – since no matter what happens, it ends in death. Here, Rugenstein’s interpretation differs from other scholarly accounts such as John Morreall’s.

For Kierkegaard, although humor is the highest realm of the comic, the religious realm is still higher, bringing humor and religion into the sphere of transcendence. Both humor and religion transcend our terminal mortality, our pain and our imperfect human condition. Rugenstein also sees humor as a means of indirect communication, agreeing with Lippit (2000) who writes that “irony and humour as incognitos both protect the appropriate form of inwardness in the ethical or religious person, and enable something of the nature of this inwardness to be indirectly communicated (to some)” (quoted on p.95). He also claims that Kierkegaard has

been largely disregarded or misunderstood in modern humor research, but in fact recent fruitful accounts of Kierkegaard on humor have been published by Pierre Bühler (2005) and Lydia Amir (2014). Moreover, this reviewer would have appreciated Rugenstein's showing not only the differences between Jean Paul's and Kierkegaard's understandings of humor, but also highlighting in more detail the evident overlaps in their conceptualizations.

The book's third and final part concerns Sigmund Freud's two essays, "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" (1905) and "Humor" (1927). Rugenstein argues (in line with others) that humor is a game between the ego and the super-ego. In a therapeutic context, humor can be utilized as a form of communication to mirror behavior, thoughts and emotions, allowing us to see discrepancies in ourselves. The proper function of humor is thus not to laugh about pain or suffering, but to laugh *despite* it. Humor allows a perspective-taking that assists in the resolution of problems, and here Rugenstein delivers more evidence for his claim that changes in perspective are essential to humor.

Rugenstein states his aims clearly and his train of thought is laid out systematically. The information is somewhat densely presented, with an abundance of footnotes along with detailed further sources and reading suggestions (the list of references runs to over 480 citations). Drawing on his own studies of psychology and philosophy, the author integrates the literature from several disciplines and guides the reader competently through it. Although his focus on the importance of subjectivity may be novel in its intensity, elements of his arguments can be found elsewhere, witness Amir (2014), Bühler (2005), and Morreall (2008), to name but three.

This reviewer is a psychologist by training, and others may be better placed to judge some of Rugenstein's philosophical and literary analyses (e. g., his interpretation of Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms and their relation to humor). Yet he is seldom unclear: Rugenstein makes his hypotheses plausible and systematically elaborates on them. The book is written in an engaging style making it accessible to a broad readership. Its first part will interest humor scholars from any discipline, while its elaboration on what humor is, has been, and is becoming (as seen through the viewpoints of philosophy and psychology) is both challenging and informative. Though a deeper conclusion (the present text reads rather poetically) would have helped make the links between the book's three parts more explicit, Rugenstein's book will serve as a useful tool for students of humor at all levels.

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